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NOW FOR THE CIA?
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``Something,'' boomed Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Democratic senator from New York, ``happened. The cold war came to an end. This was big.'' And so, to mark the event, he introduced a bill into the Senate, entitled, of course, The End of the Cold War Act.

As is Moynihan's style, the bill is a serious point masquerading as a joke. Its central message is that, Gorbachevian second thoughts permitting, it is time to reassess the purpose of the things America did during the cold war.

One of the first things it did (in 1947) was to establish a Central Intelligence Agency, so Moynihan has already cast an eye on the 219-acre site of the CIA across the Potomac in Langley.

His modest proposal would transfer the CIA's functions and people to the State Department, and make the secretary of state also director of central intelligence (DCI).

When the CIA was born, it aimed to be ``bigger than State by '48,'' and it did not take much longer to achieve its goal, according to those who claim to know how big it is. Now, argues Moynihan, is the time to cut it down to size.

The CIA and its director, William Webster, need not worry too much about being moved to Foggy Bottom. They do have to worry about what Congress has in store for them.

David McCurdy, the new chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, plans to review fundamentally the structures and priorities of those who spy for their country. He will be joined in the work by David Boren, his fellow Oklahoman who chairs the Intelligence Committee in the Senate.

The Oklahomans do not expect to find anything like the Iran-contra mess, or the illegalities unearthed in the 1970s. Their stated purpose is to consider the CIA's priorities for the 1990s, and to assess how competent it is to achieve them.

An unstated purpose on the part of some of their colleagues is to assess whether Webster is the right man for the job.

Webster (``nice man to play tennis with'' is one current bit of damning-with-faint-praise) does not have it easy. He was the second choice for the post of director in 1987, after the death of William Casey.

Robert Gates, Casey's deputy, was first choice but the Senate deemed him too tarred by the Iran-contra brush. As president, George Bush quickly appointed Gates to be his deputy national security adviser _ a post which does not require Senate confirmation. Ever since there has been a palpable feeling that Bush, who was himself once the boss at Langley, is his own DCI, with Gates as his in-house deputy.

Webster has never been in Bush's inner circle. The agency was criticized by some in the administration for poor work in Panama in

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1989. In Congress, Moynihan has enjoyed tearing into three decades of woeful CIA overstatements of the strength of the Soviet economy.

Late last year Congress challenged the agency head-on. It passed a $30 billion budget for intelligence, but insisted on being informed of requests for foreign or private help in covert operations.

Bush refused to sign the bill, which lapsed and will have to be reintroduced; and the administration has continued its counterattack on Congress. When Tom Foley, the speaker of the House, appointed McCurdy, a moderate Democrat, as chairman, he also named four liberals to committee vacancies. The administration muttered about grave disquiet, secrets compromised and so on, trying to throw Congress back on to the defensive.

Such tactics will not work. The agency is in the doghouse partly because Webster lost credibility in Congress when he seemed confused about the effectiveness of sanctions against Iraq, reinforcing the sense that the gulf is not the CIA's strong suit.

The CIA has had an unhappy time in the Middle East ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979. Some of its best people were lost in the bombing of the embassy in Lebanon in 1983. Western hostages remain imprisoned. The United States, until last August, looked a fumbler. The CIA insists it predicted the invasion of Kuwait and was ignored. (Did it, and why was it ignored?)

The Boren-McCurdy examination will aim to find out how well-fitted the spies are for other end-of-the-cold-war challenges. What expertise does the CIA have on the nationality issue in the Soviet Union, for example?

The CIA insists that it has switched its priorities away from merely assessing Soviet military might toward drugs and the proliferation of military weapons, such as ballistic missiles and nerve gas, while continuing its work on counterterrorism. Some congressmen think that only the nameplates have been changed.

There will be controversy, too, over the desire of some intelligence chiefs to expand their brief into ``economic intelligence,'' which seems to mean finding out what other countries (presumably Japan) are planning that may undermine America's economy.

When men who have spent a career counting submarines in the Baltic try to work out what the new ve$ion of a Sony Walkman will look like, espionage stops being a profession and starts being a joke.

Moynihan would argue that it always has been pretty worthless (he asks why the CIA failed to give warning of the unpopularity of the Shah of Iran). McCurdy would not go so far; his model is the Defense Department, which, he argues, has made a genuine effort to reassess its task at a time of falling budgets.

He would like the CIA to do the same. But the former DCI in the Oval Office still has a taste for espionage, and will need convincing of the need for change.